

On Feminists on The Subject

From James Heartfield's 'The "Death of the Subject" Explained', 2002

Extract from Chapter Two

The Socially Constructed Subject

In her book *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Judith Butler develops the 'paradoxical' account of 'subjection'. 'If, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject', she writes, 'power imposes itself on us, and weakened by its force, we come to internalise or accept its terms'. 'Power, that first appears as external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity.' It is the internalisation of the 'discourse' of power that creates the Subject. 'Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse',[i] leading Foucault to talk of the 'discursive production of the subject'.[ii]

In Butler's telling the terrible burden of subjectivity seems more or less established until she checks herself to ask 'how can it be that the subject, taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency?'.[iii] How indeed?

The first answer is that the theory depends upon a play on words. The word 'subject' has two, related, meanings. It can mean the active party, the subject in the sentence, 'He threw the ball', which is related to the wider meaning of the rights-bearing Subject, who is a free agent. Otherwise, subject can be a verb meaning to impose, as in 'I subject him to torture'. Or subject can be the noun for those under the King's rule.[iv] All these different meanings are connected. The word comes from the Latin *jacere*, to throw or cast, and its meaning was widened to mean 'exercise power over'.[v]

The shifting meaning of Subject in Butler's play on words, though, has its origin in social changes.[vi] Where few people exercised power, that power was for most, the experience of subjugation – hence (the Crown's) subjects, i.e., recipients of the exercise of power. The historical subjection of the sovereign power to democratic

control gives us the more contemporary meaning of Subject as master of his own destiny. The modern meaning carries the older meaning within it, in the sense that the word still means something like subjugate, but now with the implication of a mastery over circumstances rather than people.[vii] But this lingering trace of the older meaning is a foothold for Butler.

The reversal of meanings whereby Subject formation becomes enslavement rather than liberation begins with the critique not of subjectification, but of *objectification*.

Specifically, it was feminist thinkers who first showed how ideological representations of women could serve to render them as 'objects of the male gaze'.[viii] In 'slasher' films, for example, camera shots made the audience 'both voyeur and aggressor'.[ix]

For Susanne Kappeler pornography 'shows one and only one constant element of representational content: the woman-object. But there is another constant factor: the male-subject, producer and consumer of representation ... the viewer plays the imaginary hero in relation to the woman-"object"'.[x] Here the objectification of woman divides the pornographic worldview into male subjects and female objects. The question arises, is objectification a necessary consequence of subjectification? Kappeler writes, 'The woman objectified implies a subject, a hero of her degradation.'[xi]

Is the opposite also implied, that a Subject, a hero, implies objectification and degradation? If that were true then the entire project of subjective freedom is called into question. All subjectivity would be compromised as complicit in the degradation of others. Conversely, the critique of objectification would seem to imply that women demand to be treated as Subjects in their own right, though not all have seen it that way.

Maeve Cooke writes, for example, that 'feminists have rejected the ideal of autonomy' that defines the Subject.[xii]

Judith Butler takes a similar view. 'Do the exclusionary practices that ground feminist theory in a notion of "women" as subject paradoxically undercut feminist goals...?', she asks.[xiii] In this reading, women's liberation is an 'exclusionary practice' because it implies a Subject, women, of liberation, excluding the possibility of a non-subjectively grounded feminism. 'What sense does it make to extend representation to Subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the Subject?...The identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics.'[xiv]

Butler means that a movement that sees women as Subjects reproduces the basic structure of the society that it is challenging. Feminism for Butler advances a critique of the Subject *per se*, not simply a reformist demand for the extension of the 'normative requirements of the Subject' to encompass women.

The implication is clear: it is not the male monopoly over the rights of the Subject that is at fault, but the very 'ideal of autonomy' itself. Women in adapting the mantle of Subject, conform to these unspoken, normative requirements.

At this point one has to wonder whether Butler is carried away with her own dialectical skills. What began as a criticism of the monopoly over freedom exercised by men has turned, paradoxically, into a criticism of freedom as such.

Notes

[i] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford: University Press, 1997, p2-3

[ii] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p5

[iii] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p10

[iv] The British Labour MP Tony Wright makes this play on words in the title of his book *Citizens or Subjects* without even realising what he is doing.

[v] *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed CT Onions, Oxford: University Press, 1985

[vi] English philosopher TH Green suggests that the different meanings are national. 'English writers commonly call that the subject of a right that Germans would call the object', *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation and other writings*, Cambridge: University Press, 1986, p180

[vii] The word 'sovereignty' carries a similar history, where the original exercise of sovereignty was restricted to the Prince, its universalisation suggests to some, like Tony Wright in his *Citizens or Subjects*, that the sovereign power of the elected assembly is simply despotism to the nth power.

[viii] Beatrix Campbell and Anna Coote A, *Sweet Freedom: the struggle for women's liberation*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, p227

[ix] Vincent, Sally, *The New Statesman*, 19 December 1980

[x] 'Pornography: The Representation of Power' in Catherine Itzin (ed), *Pornography: Women, violence and civil liberties, a radical new view*, p93

[xi] 'Pornography: The Representation of Power' in Catherine Itzin (ed), p93

[xii] *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, Edited by Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley, London Routledge, 1999, p260

[xiii] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London, 1990, p5

[xiv] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p5-6

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